

**SERIES 1998-99**  
**CIRCULAR LETTER: C-31**

**TO:** Superintendents of Schools  
School Principals  
Leaders of Education Organizations

**FROM:** Theodore S. Sergi, Commissioner of Education

**SUBJECT:** Raising Responsible Young People

**DATE:** June 9, 1999

We are all troubled by the tragedy in Colorado and by the wave of inappropriate reactions – by a very small number of students – to disrupt our own schools. Given the circumstances, we have had no choice but to take all threats seriously. I know your jobs have not been easy dealing with this every day. I am also sure you have heard and read many opinions on *what the problem is* and *what we should do about it*. **We know that no single solution is the answer.**

Beyond the pranks and disruption, I believe we have multiple problems dealing with youth violence in general, and we must have multiple solutions and many different partners playing unique roles.

While we can never know for certain what is best to do, **we know each of us can do more.**

I believe we can raise a generation of young people incapable of harming themselves and others. However, we must expect children as early as three and four years of age to act responsibly toward others, and then, increasingly accept their responsibility to help others. Further, we must act on this expectation by giving young people more opportunities to practice responsible and helping behavior. Teasing, taunting, bullying, fighting, name-calling and harassing must be labeled wrong and dealt with firmly and quickly. We need to keep in mind, however, that discipline should always involve both **consequences** for inappropriate behavior and **instruction** on expected, appropriate and respectful behavior.

The week before the events in Colorado, Governor John G. Rowland wrote to your mayor or first selectman and board chair to request that they **convene a broad-based, local group to talk about the issues** of preventing youth violence and developing safe schools in your community, what works and what more is needed. I can't urge you strongly enough to get involved, to participate in and to lead that local discussion. (Please see Appendix A.) You will note that we are planning to collect very brief (one- to two-page) reports in September which summarize **what you have done, what new plans you have and what else the state could do to help**. In the meantime, do not hesitate to contact me with your perspective on what more we can do at the state level to help you to address this issue. The overwhelming opinion of communities that have had local discussions, particularly those including students, has been that these conversations have helped open communication and develop specific actions.

I am also attaching Governor Rowland's letter of June 1998 (Appendix B) and my article of September 1998 (Appendix C) on this topic. Superintendents will remember that Governor Rowland spoke to us at length on the value of mentoring at our back-to-school meeting last August.

Many state and national resources on these topics are available, and each superintendent has received a package of the most recent and most useful documents. Almost all of these materials are also available on the Web.

I believe it is critical for all of us to take every joke, threat or other more serious incident as an opportunity to teach right and wrong. I also hope you are reaching out to child guidance clinics, hospitals, police, mental health associations and providers, and family support organizations to help individual students and their families.

Recently, Governor Rowland spent more than an hour talking with members of the State Student Advisory Council on Education (SSACE). The students had prepared their positions on mentoring, suspension and expulsion, and CAPT. They believe that every high school should provide opportunities for older students to mentor and tutor elementary school students, that most out-of-school suspensions and expulsions do not help develop responsible behavior, and that CAPT can be improved. Most of the discussion time, however, was spent by the students telling the Governor what they thought about Littleton. There was strong agreement that we are not doing enough to get help for students exhibiting all the characteristics of those in need of support, and that the "clique world" can be broken down by well-planned school activities. The students gave examples of what many of you have done to respond to both of these issues. A recent report, **Youth Violence: Connecticut Schools Respond** (red cover), by the Safe Schools and Communities Coalition includes many examples of programs in Connecticut.

On a very positive note, I am including with this letter the report on the most recent **SSACE Challenge to Educational Citizenship Awards**. These projects represent tens of thousands of young people acting responsibly, constructively and compassionately.

I believe **the best deterrent to disruptive behavior and violence is the self-confidence built from success** in academics, the arts, athletics, community service, leadership and other positive interactions with adults and other students. This must be supported by a safe and positive school environment in which students interact and communicate with understanding and respect for others. **Integrated with our regular instruction**, we need to find more ways to provide opportunities for more students to demonstrate responsible behavior. We should have students, at an early age, begin to read, write and speak about resolving differences, social and emotional competencies, and respect for oneself and others.

I applaud each of you for taking steps to review, revise and implement security measures and crisis management plans, but I hope *prevention activities will continue to be our top priority*. **After your local discussion, please consider taking action, before the next school year**, on initiatives such as: students mentoring students; student assistance teams or mental health teams; peer mediation and conflict resolution; breaking down group boundaries; counseling outreach and alternative programs for those students most disconnected from school, family and success; and school-family-community and police collaboratives.

**We can all do more!**

Thank you.

Attachments